Why Einstein Became Famous in America
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• *ABSTRACT*

*An attempt is made to explain why Einstein became a celebrity in America in 1919–21. The initial factor was the sudden great interest in the theory of relativity that developed because of the dramatic way it was announced as being confirmed, and because of the phrases that happened to be associated with it. These phrases were particularly suited to generate interest in America, which at that time was especially xenophobic, suspicious of science, fearful of domination, but also greatly concerned with advancement and self-improvement. The fame of the theory naturally led to curiosity about Einstein, the theory's creator. When Einstein came to the United States in 1921 as part of a Zionist delegation, the warm welcome American Jews gave the delegation, and Chaim Weizmann in particular, was mistakenly described by the American press as a hero's welcome for Einstein. This led to a complex series of interactions between the Yiddish and English language press that resulted in Einstein being considered a hero and a secular saint. But the xenophobia and suspicion that had played a part in the theory's fame, also contributed to Einstein's growing personal fame.*

# Why Einstein Became Famous in America

## Marshall Missner

**Just why Einstein became** so famous in America (and in other countries) has been puzzling to his biographers and to other commentators. There is no problem in dating the point when he became a celebrity. On 6 November 1919, at a joint meeting of the Royal Society and Royal Astronomical Society in London, the results were announced of two expeditions that had photographed and measured the solar eclipse of 20 May 1919. These results were taken as confirming Einstein's general theory of relativity, and from that date on Einstein became world-famous. But why? His theory did not have any obvious technological consequences at the time, nor did it conflict with any entrenched religious dogma. Further,

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even though the apparatus of a world-wide communication system that enabled Einstein to become a celebrity has been in place throughout the twentieth century, it has not generated world-wide recognition and fame for any other theoretical scientist. Einstein's achievements, as great as they were, cannot be used to explain why other scientists whose achievements were of at least similar magnitude, such as Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, did not gain any public recognition at all.

This paper is an attempt to dispel the mystery surrounding Einstein's fame in America in the period of November 1919 until August 1921. This was the crucial period for the development of Einstein's fame, as afterwards his reputation grew and fed on what had already been achieved. While there is no reason to believe that there was a single cause for Einstein's fame, the American press was *the* instrument that made Einstein into a celebrity. People learned about him by reading articles in newspapers and magazines, and these reports are the main source of evidence for constructing an explanation of the curious development. But these reports did not simply take an obscure person and puff him up into a universally known figure. Rather, like any product that is successful in the marketplace, there was a complex and changing interaction between the produced reports and the public that apprehended them. Furthermore, subsequent events and the reports written about them also contributed to the complicated process.

More than six decades after the fact, one can read the very articles that were written then. Trying to gauge their impact on the public and determine the interaction that took place is much more difficult. But examining what was written yields certain revealing repeated themes and patterns, and by using other information about the social context, an answer can be developed to the puzzle of Einstein's fame.

It is also helpful to keep in mind the distinction between the theory of relativity and Einstein himself. Both of them became famous, but their fame did not occur concurrently in the United States. After the eclipse announcement, the theory of relativity was widely discussed, and its implications were carefully examined. The theory made a strong impression on the public, and as a result a great interest developed in the person said to be the creator of this new idea. Einstein's personal fame was thus, to a large extent, a result of the fame of his theory. It was only in 1921, when he travelled to the United States, that he became a celebrity in the sense that his

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appearance and his personality (or maybe more accurately, his persona) became familiar to the public. But there would have been no great attention paid to Einstein if the theory had not engendered such a hubbub in the first place. The initial problem is to understand why the theory became so well-known.

## The Theory's Fame

Usually, scientific theories are established through the slow accumulation of data; however, the theory of relativity was dramatically confirmed by one event. The subsequent announcement of its confirmation at the London meeting was said to have overturned the scientific structure that had been developed since Aristotle. Other scientific achievements have not been presented to the world in such dramatic circumstances.

Furthermore, what was said at the meeting contributed to the impact. J.J. Thomson, President of the Royal Society, apparently forgot the British reputation for understatement as he called the announcement, 'one of the momentous, if not the most momentous pronouncements in the history of human thought'.[1] The *New York Times* then used this quote to say that Thomson had called the theory 'one of the greatest of human achievements'.[2] The headline in the *Washington Post* produced the variation that the theory, if true, is 'the most portentous scientific discovery in the history of the world'.[3] Whatever Thomson did say, the various quotes attributed to him attracted attention and focused the public's interest on the new scientific discovery.

But what were the features of the new theory that made it such a startling achievement? There were many accounts written about the theory of relativity in newspapers and magazines after the eclipse announcement and these reports aroused interest in the theory. This heightened interest was due for the most part to the language that was used to describe the theory. In the early reports, certain phrases and terms were used over and over again, and they formed a core that almost all subsequent articles drew upon. These phrases were striking in part because they did *not* contain unfamiliar technical terms. In discussions about the other great scientific achievements of the twentieth century, one comes across terms like 'complementarity', 'quantum', 'quark' and 'double helix', and these terms are too arcane to have any strong impact. But in accounts of

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Einstein's theory, one finds the phrases 'curved space', 'four dimensions' and 'finite universe'. The words in these phrases are all familiar enough so that the public would not just pass them over as being beyond comprehension, but they do have an intriguing and paradoxical aspect that arouses curiosity. Just how can space be curved? How could there possibly be another dimension besides height, length and width? In what way could the universe be bounded? The terms are familiar, but the combinations are, to say the least, unusual and striking. Other phrases that were associated with the theory did not have a paradoxical quality, but given the temper of the times, they were particularly well-suited for generating attention.

The following is a catalogue of the key phrases that were used in describing the theory of relativity.

### *Revolution*

The first article to report the announcement of the eclipse expedition and to describe its significance, appeared in the *Times* of London on 7 November 1919. The headline 'Revolution in Science' was chosen to indicate the effect of the eclipse photographs. The article itself was a little more circumspect, as it said that there was a disagreement among scientists whether the new theory 'would revolutionize the accepted fundamentals of physics'. The *Washington Post* reprinted this *Times* article on 10 November, and it used this last phrase as part of the headline in saying 'Fundamentals of Physics may be Revolutionized'.

In subsequent articles in magazines and newspapers the new theory was characterized as a revolution, and scientific authorities such as Max Planck and Oliver Lodge were quoted as substantiating this view.[4] The establishment that was overthrown by this radical change was said to be the science of Newton and Euclid, and Einstein was even called the John L. Sullivan of science for 'having knocked out Euclid and driven Newton into a corner'.[5] Even those who did not accept the theory agreed that it had revolutionary features. One critic called it 'Bolshevism in science'.[6] Protests by others, and even by Einstein himself, that the new theory was not so revolutionary after all,[7] did little to moderate the impression that a radical change had occurred in science.

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*Relativity*

The *New York Times* first used the term 'relativity theory' in a headline on 11 November 1919, and afterward this was the name used to refer to Einstein's theory in almost every article on the subject. Einstein himself had originally decided to use that name for his theory, although he came to believe later that it was misleading, and that the 'principle of covariance' would have been more appropriate.[8] Also, many other physicists concluded that the selection of the term 'relativity' was not a very happy one.[9]

In spite of these disclaimers, the term 'relativity' stuck and is still used to identify Einstein's theory. It seems likely that if the theory had been named 'the principle of covariance', or 'invariance' (another suggestion of Einstein's[10]), it would have had much less public impact. These alternative names are technical terms that have no familiar ring to them. But 'relativity' is quite different, for 'relative' has a wide common use, and the theory of relativity was viewed as indicating that in some sense things are relative.

It is worth noting, however, that in the America of 1919–21, Einstein's theory did not lead to the wider use or application of the term 'relative' to other fields. In particular, no extrapolations of the following kind were made: since Einstein's theory of relativity is true in physics, it must also be true in the fields of ethics and art and so there are no absolute standards of morality or beauty.[11] This kind of inference can be found later in the 1920s and 1930s after the theory of relativity had been more or less accepted.[12] The articles about the new theory in 1919–20, however, are quite clear in applying the term only to time and space. Article after article said that the point of the new theory was that time and space are not absolute; instead, they are relative. But just what meaning was attached to 'relative space' and 'relative time'?

*Destroyer of Space and Time*

The first reports after the eclipse announcement contrasted the new relative space and time of Einstein's theory with the old absolute space and time associated with Newton, Euclid and common sense. There was general agreement that the old conceptions had been delivered a deathblow, but the meaning of the new view required explanation. Einstein was quoted as having said that 'from this time

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henceforth, time by itself and space by itself were mere shadows'.[13] In an interview with Einstein on 3 December 1919, he was asked to explain the meaning of relative time and space, and he gave what became his standard explanation. He said that time and space were formerly considered as vessels for objects, but according to his view, if there were no objects, there would be no time or space.[14] Another expert, Arthur Eddington, said in lectures that time and space are now seen to be relative to the observer. What is time for one may be space for another.[15]

What this came to mean in many of the reports was that Einstein was the destroyer of space and time — that Einstein had actually proven somehow that time and space do not really exist. The phrase 'Einstein had destroyed space and time' first appeared in a *New York Times* editorial on 7 December 1919, and in 1921 it was still a commonly used phrase. On 5 April 1921, the *New York Times* spoke of Einstein's 'abolition of space and time'. In an article reporting Einstein's lecture in Vienna in 1921, the reporter said that afterwards the audience acted as if time and space had been taken away from them.[16] Finally, in a dispute in the New York City Council about whether to give Einstein an honour called 'The Freedom of the City', an alderman by the name of Falconer voted against giving Einstein the honour. He later said, in explaining his actions, that he had not realized that the Einstein who was being voted on was the 'Einstein, destroyer of time and space'.[17]

The idea that space and time had been changed apparently disturbed quite a few people, for it seemed to imply that the world was no longer a stable place, and that lengths of space and periods of time could be manipulated by those who knew the proper mathematical theory. The effect was such that one writer said we can now 'sympathize with those frightened people who lived in the times of Copernicus and Galileo'.[18] Reassurances were given that the new theory, besides changing space and time, did not also destroy the law of gravity, and so there was no danger of the earth slipping out of its orbit and hurtling into space.[19] In other cases the frightening aspect of the new theory was dealt with in a satirical way as in the following example from the *Atlantic Monthly* of October 1920:

> Does the time seem out of joint? Let us but solve the equation $M0_B = OX$, and it will be whatever we wish. Does the land of our dreams seem hopelessly far off? Then blow, ye eternal winds, on the axis of x; and behold the far off land is just across the way . . . Do Bolsheviki attempt to agitate a peaceful community? Let

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> our velocity be $-dv(An)$ and presto! these uncomfortable characters won't have been born for a century and a half yet; and we may confidently leave their treatment to posterity. Do some of our enthusiastic officials suppress certain of the rights of man? Let us apply the formula $xdys=y^2$ and whoof, they find themselves in the seventeenth century, where they may hunt the fearsome witch and the wily Quaker to their hearts' content. Does my revered wife's uncle read aloud items from the Daily Transcript? $Q=pz$ and lo! it is four o-clock and the paper hasn't yet arrived.

There were also other attempts to make light of the idea that the theory of relativity gives individuals the power to manipulate space and time.[20] But the satire and the reassurances given indicate discomfort with the new theory, as it suggested that basic properties of the world are not impervious to human control. Rather, the world could no longer be considered as objective and independent, and relative time and relative space could be changed by those who knew how.

### *Fourth Dimension, Curved Space and the Finite Universe*

Einstein's theory had not only overthrown old scientific theories; it had even destroyed the stability of the world itself. But the theory was not thought of as completely destructive. The theory also posited new features of the physical world that seemed intriguing, and not necessarily frightening.

One of the new features was the fourth dimension. Einstein admitted that this concept gave non-mathematicians 'mysterious shudderings' and 'feelings not unlike those awakened by thoughts of the occult'.[21] But he said that the idea was actually commonplace. Many other writers agreed that there was nothing of a sensational nature about the idea of four dimensions, but that it was simply a mathematical device.[22] But in spite of these protests and denials, many did find the idea very bizarre. To some, four dimensions seemed 'more like the dream of a poet than the fact of the physical world'.[23] To another, it seemed 'a monstrosity'.[24] And to another, it seemed to be the product of a 'super-world being' who has a 'four-dimensional mind'.[25]

The concepts of curved space and the finite universe also exhibited the same pattern. Each one was introduced in the first reports after the eclipse announcement and attempts were made to explain what they meant.[26] No very clear explanations were given, and there were

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those that insisted that these new conceptions were preposterous or even abhorrent.[27]

## *Dreams*

These strange new aspects attributed to the universe by Einstein's theory suggested to a number of commentators and the critics that the ordinary person's conception of the world is fundamentally mistaken. While most people think that they live in a world of rigid, unchanging material objects, the new theory is that the world is actually 'confused with a certain topsi-turviness'.[28] In several accounts of the theory, there is even the more startling, though rarely stated, implication that not only is our waking experience illusory, but that our dream experience corresponds much more closely to the world as it really is, according to Einstein.

This association was made in a number of different ways. One way was by directly connecting the theory of relativity with the experience of dreams. This was explicitly done in *The Nation* by a writer who said that the examples used to illustrate the new theory are situations 'usually only found in bad dreams'.[29] But the connection was also made in several indirect ways. One was the suggestion that the theory itself was just the product of a dream. This suggestion was made by Professor Poor in his first critical article in the *New York Times* of 16 November 1919, and the same suggestion was made with a less critical tone in *Current Opinion* in June 1921. Another way the connection was made occurred in the report of Einstein's lecture in Vienna in 1921. It was said that Einstein's talk had such an effect on people that afterward there was silence and everyone seemed as if in a dream.[30] When interest began to turn to Einstein himself, in 1920 and 1921, it was noted that as a youth Einstein had just been considered a dreamer,[31] and his wife said that when he was inspired, he just dreamed and played the violin.[32]

There was another kind of very indirect connection made between Einstein's theory and dreams. The most common literary reference that was used in relation to the theory was *Alice in Wonderland*,[33] and the most frequent philosophical reference view was the theory of subjective idealism.[34] In both cases one can find the theme of a dream. *Alice in Wonderland* clearly has that character and subjective idealism is often understood as viewing the entire external world as

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just a projection of the particular idealist's imagination — or, in other words, that the world is nothing but a dream.

## *Twelve Men*

The theory of relativity contained implications that some said conflicted with common-sense notions, but almost everyone who wrote or spoke about the theory said that it was very difficult to understand — perhaps even incomprehensible — even to physicists.[35] There is hardly an article about the theory in the years 1919 to 1921 that does not make this sort of point, and the difficulty of the new theory was illustrated in concrete terms by the claim that there were only twelve men in the world who understood it. Of all the phrases used in connection with the theory of relativity, this is the one that had the most staying power, for the legend that there were only twelve people who knew what Einstein was talking about is still expressed today: it may be the source of the common opinion that Einstein was the greatest genius of the twentieth century.

The first mention of the twelve men occurred on 8 November 1919 in the *Manchester Guardian*. After describing the meeting of the Royal Society and attempting to explain the theory, the article provided a very brief biography of Einstein that concluded with the following two sentences:

> When he offered his last important work to the publishers, he warned them that there were not more than twelve persons in the whole world who understood it. Nevertheless, they took the risk.

Two days later the *New York Times* reprinted the biography of Einstein at the end of its second article on the new development in physics, and included verbatim the two sentences about the twelve men. It also used as a subheadline for this article, 'Book for Twelve Wise Men'.[36]

After this introduction on 10 November, the theme of the twelve men was repeated a number of different times in newspapers and magazines. Einstein himself was invariably asked whether there were actually only twelve men who understood his theory, and he answered in different ways. When he was first asked this question on 3 December 1919,[37] he laughed and just said that the theory was very difficult to explain to laymen. In 1920, Einstein's answer was that it

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was not that bad that only ten (sic) people understood the theory, but it was important to realize that the theory was a mathematical one that would be very hard for a layman to understand.[38] In 1921, when Einstein came to America, he explicitly denied the whole matter. He said that most scientists understood his theories and he added that most of his students in Berlin understood them perfectly.[39] But by this time the denial was much too late to stop the story. The very same day that Einstein issued the denial, the *Washington Post* included the following remarks in its front-page article reporting Einstein's arrival in the United States:

> Less than two years ago Einstein published a little book made up principally of mathematical formulae. It wasn't a good bet for the publishers and Einstein himself admitted that there were probably only twelve living men in the world who would be able to understand it. But it seems those twelve men, who were the greatest scientists, immediately got it and read it. And when they had finished they set up a shout — it was almost an amazed and outraged yelp — that immediately echoed around the world.[40]

The next day the *New York Times* editorialized that it was happy to learn that there were more than twelve people that understood relativity,[41] but less than two weeks later the twelve men reappeared there too. In a review of books on the new theory, the reviewer said that Professor Kasner of Columbia should be included as one of 'Einstein's select group of twelve persons'.[42]

That the story of the twelve men never died out, even though Einstein himself and others offered disclaimers,[43] shows the hold that this phrase had on the public mind. Perhaps the number 'twelve', with its association with mysterious and magically powerful groups such as the apostles and the Zodiac, contributed to the effect of the phrase. In any case, it clearly struck a chord at the time (which will be discussed below) and it was probably the most important factor in the growing fame of the theory of relativity.

### *The Image of Relativity*

All the phrases that were used in connection with the theory of relativity can be fitted together to form the 'image' that the theory had in 1919–21. First of all, the image suggested that the theory of relativity was not just a new development, but rather was a revolutionary one. It overthrew the accepted ideas of the past, both

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in science and in common sense, and established radically new concepts in place of the old verities. These new concepts implied that it was now possible to do things that had previously been thought to be *logically* impossible. Now, through relativity's use of abstruse and arcane methods, it was possible to bend space and time, it might be possible to enter a fourth dimension, and it might even be possible to imitate Christopher Columbus and travel completely around the universe.

But this new-found power had a sinister aspect, because not everyone would be able to gain it. The implication of the 'twelve men' was that only an élite that knew the requisite mathematics possessed this kind of power that had previously been associated with dreams and magic. But for the masses, uninformed, and perhaps incapable of learning the new theory, relativity was considered the possession of a 'small and rather haughty minority of Superior Persons'.[44]

## How the Image of the Theory was Suited to Generating Interest in America

The language used in connection with the theory of relativity, and the general image of the theory it built, touched some nerves in the American public in 1919–21. But this just states the obvious. The burden of explanation is to specify how the image happened to be so well-suited for generating public interest at the time.

One clear point of correspondence that many commentators have noted is that the revolution in science caused by Einstein's theory occurred at a time of concern about wide-spread social revolution. 1919 was a year of tremendous unrest in the United States and around the world, and the newspapers were filled with articles about the Reds, the Bolsheviks, the IWW, and strikes of various kinds. In 1919 four million Americans were on strike at one time or another, a number not reached again until 1946. Also the Communists had just captured Russia two years previously, and they were very strong in Hungary, Germany and Italy.[45] In an atmosphere of new forms of government overthrowing and threatening the old, any development in science that was so widely called a 'revolution' and a 'radical change' was bound to attract attention. Calling the theory 'Bolshevism in science', as Charles Poor did in the *New York Times* on 16 November 1919, made explicit a connection that surely had

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already been made in the minds of many people.

America's response to the revolutionary political developments was the 'Red Scare', which was only one aspect of a broader xenophobic trend. Other manifestations of this movement were the rejection of United States participation in the League of Nations, the Palmer raids to round up and deport radicals, the rise of the Klu Klux Klan, the passing of rigid quota laws restricting immigration, Sacco and Vanzetti's arrest, the beginning of Henry Ford's antisemitic campaign, and the institution of quota systems on Jews in many Eastern colleges.[46]

The growing xenophobia also shaped the reaction to Einstein's theory in the United States. The English view that the new theory was opening up a wondrous new world,[47] was not the usual reaction in the United States. Instead, articles about the theory often expressed feelings of hostility and even fear. For example, after the eclipse announcement in early November 1919, the *New York Times* had six different editorials concerning the theory of relativity in the next six weeks. The tone of each of these editorials was antagonistic and critical. Furthermore, previously mentioned satirical efforts to ridicule the new theory also indicate something that was very disturbing about it: Einstein was often considered the destroyer of space and time who had somehow revoked gravity and prophesied the end of the world.[48]

The xenophobic feelings that lay behind these various expressions of fear and hostility were seldom clearly articulated, but in certain instances such feelings were clearly evident in the reaction to the new theory. In discussing Einstein in an editorial on 5 April 1921, the *New York Times* said the following:

> As professor Einstein remarks, the 'man in the street' has felt the foundations of belief in upheaval. He has an explanation of the fact, regarding it as 'psychopathological'. It is an interesting theory; but to those who know our man in the street, it is not plausible. The true answer is democracy. The Declaration of Independence itself is outraged by the assertion that there is anything on earth, or in interstellar space that can be understood by only the chosen few.

The point seems to be that there is something basically un-American about the new theory — namely, that it can only be understood by 'a chosen few'. It is the twelve men again. The new theory is anti-democratic because it violates the fundamental tenet of American democracy that all men are equal. This editorial alludes to a view expressed in the previous editorials in the *New York Times* that there

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was a conflict between the down-to-earth beliefs of the man in the street (American, democratic man) and the airy speculations of an élite (aristocratic, European man) and thus, when Einstein's theory was in fact confirmed, it had the effect of showing that one of the foundations of American belief was defective.[49]

But Einstein's theory not only conflicted with the American ideology of equality; it also had other very sinister implications. The public had no idea that the new theory said mass could be converted into energy, and even scientists did not think it was practically possible to do so. But the language used in discussing relativity does imply a fear that those who understood it gained the power to change basic aspects of reality. And if only twelve men did understand it, and these twelve persons were generally thought to be foreigners, as was the theory's creator, who knows what havoc would be wreaked? The fear being expressed was part of a general nightmare fear of one's life being dominated and controlled by a small conspiratorial group that had special and secret knowledge.

Previous explanations for the theory's impact have neglected its relationship to these xenophobic currents. The most developed of these explanations is presented by Ronald Tobey,[50] who says that Einstein's new theory appeared at a time in which there was a general debate in America concerning the question of whether science operated on principles that were very different from those used in ordinary experience. The new theory indicated that ordinary experience was not a reliable guide to the structure of the physical world, and this produced a shock in most people, who had a strong desire to have a true picture of what the world was like.

Tobey's view is that the ordinary person in 1919–21 had an intense interest in two very abstract, intellectual questions: what is the nature of science, and what is the truth about physical reality? But it is not very plausible that ordinary people were really concerned with just these questions. After all, very shortly after Einstein's theory became famous, quantum mechanics became established and accepted by physicists, and quantum mechanics conflicted far more with common-sense beliefs about the nature of science and the structure of the world than did the theory of relativity. In spite of this, quantum mechanics had almost no public impact at all.

To understand why the theory of relativity did make an impression it is necessary to realize that the debates about science and the nature of reality that were occurring in intellectual and scientific circles were taking place at a time when the general culture in America was

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becoming more xenophobic. The debate about the nature of science, when it trickled down to the newspapers and popular magazines, became the question of whether the American ideological belief in the equality of man was correct. The discussion about the nature of physical reality became involved in the view that some (perhaps ominous) individuals had gained the power to manipulate aspects of reality that were thought to be beyond human control. The main reason why the theory became famous was that the language used in accounts of it had implications that appealed to xenophobic feelings. The intellectual debates about the theory should be seen as taking place in the context of worries about the influence of non-Americans.

But the theory not only affected the public negatively. Probably, if it had, it would have passed quickly from public interest as soon as it became clear that nobody was going to manipulate anyone else's space and time. Like all long-lived symbols, the theory of relativity was ambiguous; it also had a more positive side, closely associated with the elements that produced hostility and fear. The fact that only twelve men understood the theory meant that if one gained the knowledge, one would become part of this special group. In a society that proclaimed that all men are equal, but also emphasized competition and success, great effort was put into trying to get ahead. According to Haldeman-Julius, publisher of the popular five-cent paperback books of this time, the theme of self-improvement ranked only behind sex as a topic of interest.[51] The new theory of relativity provided one way of improving oneself, as understanding it would mean that one had moved up some notches and was now a member of an élite. This is probably an important reason for the number of books and articles written from 1919 to 1921 claiming to explain relativity. Their publication was part of the traditional American interest in self-improvement, for what mark of advancement could be more clear than joining a group that had previously contained only twelve members?

Thus, besides fitting in with reports of foreign revolutions and un-American conspiracies, the complex symbol of relativity also fits traditional American attitudes toward domination and advancement. Here was an opportunity for equal individuals to show that they were really better than others. But, on the other hand, here was also a product of a foreign country that could be used to demonstrate that people are not really born equal, and that might also be used to control one's very life. The theory of relativity spoke

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to both of these basic attitudes, inconsistent as they were, and this ambiguity is why it made such a deep impression on the public mind.

## The Man's Fame

By 1921, interest in the theory of relativity was beginning to wane. After the initial rush of discussions and articles, the frequency of such pieces began to slacken, as it became clear that space and time were going to continue to exist in the same manner that they always had.

But in April of 1921 Einstein came to visit America, and the publicity round began again. Until his visit, not very much was known in America about the man, Einstein. A few pictures of him had been printed in some magazines, and a few interviews had also been published, but his appearance and personality were both unknown to the American public. Naturally, there was a great deal of curiosity about the man who had formulated the startling theory of relativity. But the initial attitude was certainly not the one of reverence and worship that became familiar later. Given all the negative associations of the theory itself, it would have been strange indeed if Einstein had immediately been treated as a person to be venerated.

Nevertheless, the impression that Einstein did make on his arrival was a very positive one. One reason for this was the way he appeared to reporters. He turned out to be not the 'frightening Dr Einstein' or 'the Einstein, destroyer of space and time'. He was not a haughty, aloof European looking down on boorish Americans. Rather, he was modest, humorous and most of all, informal. Furthermore, he was good copy — he gave quotable quotes.

There is no reason to believe that Einstein enjoyed talking to reporters; in fact, there is evidence to the contrary. In an interview that Mrs Einstein gave that appeared in a Yiddish newspaper,[52] she described how nervous reporters made him, and said that he did not like to talk to them. During the course of the interview, Einstein himself came into the room, and when he realized his wife was talking to a reporter, he told her that she should not be talking to the press because he had refused to give so many interviews to other papers. But when she said that this particular reporter was from a Yiddish newspaper, Einstein relented; however, he left the room himself to avoid speaking to the reporter. On another occasion,

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some photographers came to his hotel to take his picture, Einstein at first refused to come out of his room, and had to be coaxed by his wife. But when he finally did so, he smiled when his picture was taken.[53]

So even though Einstein did not like all the publicity surrounding him, and even though reporters and photographers made him nervous, he nevertheless cooperated with them, smiled when his picture was taken, and produced amusing and quotable answers to their inane questions. Why he acted in this way is not completely clear. He may have had a desire to please (not that likely), or just a clownish streak in his nature. Philipp Frank says that Einstein would answer reporters' questions by saying 'something that was not a direct answer to the question, but was still rather interesting, and which when printed conveyed to the reader a reasonable idea or at least gave him something to laugh about. Einstein was never a killjoy'.[54] In any case, something in his personality led him to do just those things that gave him a positive image in the press.

Besides his easy-going manner, which so surprised everyone, there was his actual physical appearance, which was also reassuring. He did not look like a haughty European scientist. The first photographs that appeared of him in newspapers in April of 1921 showed him standing in an ill-fitting coat, holding a violin, and smiling in a bemused way. It was not at all a frightening picture, and, highlighting the reassuring aspect of Einstein's appearance, was the fact that his pictures often had him standing next to Chaim Weizmann, the leader of the Zionist delegation, under whose auspices Einstein had come to America. Weizmann, who had a goatee and was impeccably dressed, was the embodiment of the very formal European professor. The contrast with Einstein's appearance was very sharp.[55]

The relief engendered by Einstein's appearance was expressed quite openly in the *New York Times* editorial of 5 April. The editorial began by saying that 'Professor Einstein improves upon acquaintance', and the detail that seemed to improve the *New York Times*'s view of Einstein was that he smoked a pipe. He could not be all that bad if he actually smoked a pipe, played a violin and smiled. So, the worries and fears that the theory of relativity had caused began to subside, and the unrequited fear led to a heightened sense of relief that began to develop into admiration and later into reverence.

The development of a positive view of Einstein was also enhanced

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by another factor. When he came to America, he was given a tumultuous welcome (or at least, this is the way it was reported), and this contributed to the view that Einstein was an admirable person. After all, heroes' welcomes are only given to heroes. But while it was reported that thousands spontaneously turned out to greet and honour Einstein, what really occurred was somewhat different.

When Einstein came to the United States, he did not come as a scientist arriving to discuss his theory with the scientific community. Rather, he came as part of a delegation of Zionists whose interests were to promote the cause of Zionism and to deal with some disputes within the American Zionist movement.[56] Historians of Zionism, biographers of Chaim Weizmann, and even Weizmann himself, have all described the tumultuous welcome that occurred in April of 1921 as being an expression of enthusiasm on the part of New York Jewry for the cause of Zionism, and as being directed mainly at Weizmann, the President of the International Zionist Organization and the man who had influenced England to make the Balfour Declaration which promised a homeland for the Jews in Palestine.[57] Interestingly enough, historians of science and biographers of Einstein usually describe the welcome as being directed mostly at Einstein.[58]

What was actually going on is a more complicated story than is presented by either of these two versions. There is agreement that the ones who were greeting Einstein and Weizmann were the Jews of New York City, but it is not so clear who was the object of the cheering. An examination of the Yiddish-language newspapers of that time that reported the event reveal that Einstein was not the main focus of interest — at least, at first. The main Yiddish newspapers were the *Forward,* the *Yiddishes Tageblatt, Der Tog*, and the *Jewish Gazette*. These newspapers represented different points of view in the Jewish community. By far the most influential paper was the *Forward*, which was a socialist paper; its attitude toward Zionism was basically negative. The other papers were more supportive of the Zionist cause, particularly *Der Tog*, and were also more religiously inclined.[59] These newspapers presented a diversity of views, but in all of them the initial coverage of Einstein's visit was the same, as they all gave the majority of attention to Chaim Weizmann; they treated Einstein as an interesting member of the visiting delegation, but as of no more note than Menahem Mendel Usishkin, another prominent Zionist.

The emphasis on Weizmann might have been expected in the newspapers that espoused Zionism, and indeed they did present

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Weizmann as the cause of all the shouting. It was Weizmann's picture and statements that were given prominent attention: the welcoming editorials spoke about how important Zionism was for American Jews, and how honoured America was to have such important guests, particularly Weizmann. Einstein's name was hardly even mentioned. As an illustration of who was the main attraction, consider this announcement that appeared on 4 April, page one of *Der Tog*:

> Jews of New York — You have the opportunity to see and hear Dr Chaim Weizmann, the President of the Zionist organization, and also Professor Albert Einstein, Menahem Mendel Usishkin, Dr B. Mosensohn, Tuesday morning at 11 at a meeting at City Hall.
>
> This will be Dr Weizmann's first public appearance in New York. The mayor of New York will give him the Freedom of the City and this is the first time the honor will be given to a Jew.
>
> Tomorrow — 11 a.m. meeting — The place is big enough for thousands of Jews to come to hear Dr Weizmann. This is an important occasion. Come early to get a place, so you can hear the music, American and Jewish songs. The ceremony will be short and impressive.

Even the generally anti-Zionist *Forward* gave no special consideration to Einstein in the first stories about the delegation's reception. The first article in the *Forward* on 2 April, page one, had the headline, 'Weizmann, Einstein and Usishkin Arrive Today in America'. There were pictures of equal size of Weizmann and Einstein, but most of the article was about Weizmann, and Einstein was only mentioned in the last paragraph where he was described as having 'had a great effect on scientific circles with his new discoveries'. The next day the main article on page one of the *Forward* was about the greeting. Its headline was 'Great Parade for the Zionist Delegates in New York'; the article described the parade and the thousands of Jews who greeted the visitors, followed by interviews with the prominent members of the delegation. Nine paragraphs were devoted to what Weizmann had to say at his first press conference, after which there were two paragraphs about Einstein and one about Usishkin. The two paragraphs about Einstein did not report anything that he said, but just stated that Einstein had overthrown many older scientific theories and described him as a witty man who also played the violin.

The coverage of the arrival in the Yiddish press was very different from what was said in the English-language press. For the *New York*

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*Times* and the *Washington Post*, Einstein was the main point, and Zionism and its leaders were clearly of lesser importance. Both papers described the thousands who greeted the visitors, but they indicated that the welcome was for Einstein. This is not very surprising because, for the non-Yiddish press, Zionism was probably an obscure movement of no great general interest; whereas Einstein was, in comparison, at least a known factor. The headline in the *Washington Post* article for 3 April was 'Thousands at Pier to Greet Einstein', and the sub-headline was 'Triumphal Procession in his Honor Bewilders Sensitive Jewish Scientist'. The *New York Times* article had the headline 'Professor Einstein Here, Explains Relativity', and this article had as one of its sub-headlines 'Thousands Wait For Hours to Welcome Theorist and His Party to America.' Zionism was of very minor interest in these articles, and the great and warm welcome was interpreted as being for Einstein.

Subsequently, as it became clear that there was great interest in Einstein on the part of gentile America, the Yiddish press focused more and more attention on him. Still, throughout Einstein's two-month visit, there was always more space given in all of the Yiddish papers to Weizmann and his views and activities. In the English-language press, meanwhile, Einstein was treated more and more favourably, as the enthusiastic Zionist receptions for the visiting delegation in various cities were always interpreted as being a welcome for Einstein.[60]

The Yiddish press then, seeing that Einstein was gaining general acceptance in America, began to look very favourably upon him. A good example of this occurred in the *Forward* on 5 April. On that day the *Forward* published an editorial that had the title, 'Professor Einstein's Reception in America'. The editorial expressed satisfaction that Einstein had been warmly received by the American press. This indicated that anti-Semitism was not that widespread in the United States, for the *Forward* stated that Einstein had been singled out in Europe as the target of anti-Semitic propaganda, and that American anti-Semites were going to try to throw 'dirt on him'. But Einstein's reception by the American press showed that this campaign was a failure.

On the same day, and on the same page, the *Forward* had an article about just what kind of man Einstein was. This article had the title 'Einstein — the Greatest Man in the World', and it presented a very romantic and poeticized view. The imagery of the piece was built around the idea that Einstein was a superhuman creature who not

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only studied the stars, but could sprout wings and fly amongst them. He was compared to Moses, in that he brought a new set of tablets, a new Torah, to science. Associations were also made to the *lamed-vovniks*, a group of thirty-six people, who, according to Jewish tradition, are designated to go around the world performing good deeds.

The enthusiasm for Einstein expressed in this article far surpassed anything that was published in English-language newspapers, and a similar glowing view of him was presented in other articles in the *Forward*, and also in the other Yiddish newspapers. This is particularly significant for the *Forward*, which could be very acerbic on the subject of Zionism. In later articles in that newspaper Einstein was compared to the sun's glory (8 April, p. 4) and even his Zionist views were not criticized very harshly. In an article on 18 April (p. 4), Einstein's Zionism was dismissed in a very friendly way as an impractical dream of a naive, but good-hearted idealist.

In the Yiddish newspapers that supported Zionism, there were predictably many expressions of approval for Einstein. After all, here was a famous person who identified himself with Judaism and Zionism, and an editorial in the *Yiddishes Tageblatt* of 17 April indicated that this was not always the case. The editorial was written in response to an editorial in the English-language news magazine, the *Independent*, on 16 April 1921, which had said that it was unfortunate that Einstein had come to America as a representative of a separatist movement of Jews, and not just as a scientist. The *Tageblatt's* reply was, 'May there come a time when all the celebrated Jews will proclaim their acceptance of Jewish ideals and ideas'. The *Tageblatt* also made attempts to identify Einstein even more closely with Judaism, as he was compared to a rabbi expounding the Talmud (19 April, p. 4) and Jewish sources were found for his scientific views in the *Psalms* and in the Kabbalistic book, the *Zohar* (5 May, p. 5).

Finally, an editorial in the *Yiddishes Tageblatt* on 1 June that concerned Einstein's departure summed up the attitude of the Jewish community, and also expressed why Einstein had become so generally popular:

> . . . Einstein captured the Americans not only with his head, but with his heart. Americans found him not to be a dry and threatening scholar, but a friendly, lively, simple man. He's a man that does not have the customary arrogance of many of the celebrated, and he's not capricious towards others as are many intellectuals.

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> The Jews of America are especially happy with Einstein's visit, because he is the first Jewish celebrity, who is known to the outside world, who came here on a special Jewish mission.

Einstein, who came to America as a figure of curiosity at best, left two months later as a revered person, particularly in the Jewish community; for if he had not completely captured the Americans as the *Tageblatt* said, he did capture most of the Jewish hearts. The extravagant anxieties and the hostility that were aroused by the theory of relativity began to subside, to be replaced by the admiration and reverence that began to spill over from the Jews into the general populace. Nevertheless, the hostility did not die out, as it surfaced in various ways during Einstein's visit and shortly afterward.

One such occurrence was the Falconer episode, previously mentioned: one of Falconer's reasons for voting against conferring the Freedom of New York on Einstein was that Einstein was a foreigner, and he believed that the award should be given to Americans first.[61] Hostility to Einstein as an expression of xenophobia was there to be tapped.

Another incident illustrates the same point. In July, after Einstein had left America, he was quoted as having told a Dutch reporter that in America women rule their husbands and that cultural life was very undeveloped compared to Europe.[62] This interview appeared all over the country, engendering many critical responses, as can be imagined, and even though Einstein shortly thereafter claimed he was misquoted, his denial was not really accepted. The *New York Times* had five different editorials on this issue on 9 July through to 12 July, and the point was made that Einstein, the European, had no right or grounds for criticizing America. The Yiddish press responded to this incident either defensively, saying that Einstein's view of America was correct,[63] or by expressing a very real sense of hurt that Einstein would repay the warmth given him by making unfounded critical remarks.[64]

These responses, in all of the newspapers, illustrate two points. First, the hostility towards the foreign, European Einstein never really went away and could be quickly called forth given the right stimulus. But also the references to the greeting of Einstein no longer stated that just Zionists and American Jews had turned out for the parades and receptions. Shortly after the events occurred, the warm receptions were attributed to all of America.

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## Conclusion

Einstein's fame in America was by no means inevitable, for it was built on the contingent association of many different factors. The right kind of announcement of his theory's verification occurred; the right sort of phrases were used to describe the theory; the right chords in the public were touched; Einstein came at the right time, when interest in the theory was beginning to run its course; the right kind of mass demonstrations to attract attention were held (even if they were often directed toward others); Einstein said the right things and had the right kind of appearance and personality; and there was the right kind of group, the American Zionists and the Jewish community in general, to serve as a vanguard. It is a tale of serendipity — a publicity campaign run by an invisible hand.

But it is important to realize that there was always a dark side to Einstein's fame, and while, in general, reverence for him grew, particularly among Jews, the hostility never faded away either. The recent report of the FBI files shows that even years after 1921, there was still the view that Einstein was involved in conspiracies of people with un-American views who were going to use esoteric means to subvert American life.[65] Another slighter indication of the same hostility can be found in the popular play and film of the 1940s, 'Arsenic and Old Lace', that had a very strong xenophobic strain, and one of whose villains is a sinister plastic surgeon from Europe named Dr Einstein.[66]

So, together with the view that Einstein was a great genius and a secular saint, there also developed the view that what Einstein had done would enable small groups of outsiders to use secret and mysterious methods to harness enormous power and thus control, and maybe destroy, the ordinary person's life. The reverential side became the predominant one, but the fearful side never went away, and it made a very significant contribution to the development of Einstein's fame.

## • NOTES

The views presented in this paper had their beginning at the US National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar on 'History of Modern Physical Science', held at

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the University of Maryland in 1980. I wish to thank Stephen G. Brush, the Director of the Seminar, and all of the participants, for their helpful criticisms of earlier forms of this paper. In addition, I wish to thank Esther D. Missner for her help in translating the Yiddish material.

1. *The Times* (London) (7 November 1919), 12.
2. *New York Times* (9 November 1919), 6.
3. *Washington Post* (10 November 1919), 1.
4. *New York Times* (25 November 1919), 7, and the *Independent* (29 November 1919), 136.
5. *Current Opinion* (June 1921), 803.
6. *New York Times* (16 November 1919), Section III, 8.
7. *New York Times* (4 April 1921), 5.
8. Albert Einstein, 'A Propos de "La Deduction Relativiste" de M. Emile Meyerson', *Revue Philosophique*, Vol. 105 (1928), 163.
9. Lewis Feuer, *Einstein and the Generations of Science* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 59.
10. Ibid.
11. This does not mean that such extrapolations were not made in the non-popular press, or in other countries.
12. Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 703, and Paul Carter, *Another Part of the Twenties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 72.
13. *New York Times* (16 November 1919), Section II, 1. Actually the statement was made by Herman Minkowski in an address to the 80th Assembly of German Natural Scientists and Physicians in Cologne on 21 September 1908. The *Independent* (27 December 1919), 274, used the same quote as part of the headline of a story about the theory of relativity, and also attributed it to Einstein.
14. This comment appeared in the *New York Times* (3 December 1919), 1. It was reprinted in *Revue of Revues* (January 1920), 97. Einstein repeated this explanation in his press conference on arriving in the United States: *New York Times* (4 April 1921), 5.
15. *New York Times* (4 December 1919), 19.
16. *Living Age* (April 1921), 36–38.
17. *New York Times* (7 April, 1921), 14.
18. *Independent* (29 December 1919), 259.
19. *Independent* (29 November 1919), 136, and the *Nation* (27 December 1919), 819.
20. *Washington Post* (3 April 1921), 1; *Atlantic Monthly* (June 1921), 811; and *Vanity Fair* (March 1920), 61.
21. Albert Einstein, *Relativity, The Special and General Theory* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1920), 65.
22. *New York Times* (2 December 1919), 12; *Independent* (27 December 1919), 279; *New Republic* (20 February 1920), 341–45; and *Harper's* (March 1920), 477.
23. *Current Opinion* (June 1921), 803.
24. *New York Times* (15 May 1921), Section VI, 11.
25. *New York Times* (17 April 1921), Section VII, 3.
26. *New York Times* (15 May 1921), Section VI, 11, and *Nation* (17 April 1920), 503.

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27. *Literary Digest* (23 July 1921), 27.
28. *New York Times* (7 December 1919), 18.
29. *Nation* (17 April 1920), 503.
30. *Living Age* (April 1921), 36–38.
31. *Current Opinion* (May 1920), 651–53.
32. *New York Times* (3 April 1921), 1.
33. *Atlantic Monthly* (October 1920), 570–71, and (June 1921), 811; *New York Times* (16 November 1919), Section III, 8; (5 December 1919), 14; and (8 February 1921), 17.
34. *New York Times* (7 December 1919), Section III, 1; (10 December 1919), 12; (11 January 1920), Section III, 2; (31 January 1921), 8; (5 April 1921), 18; and (15 May 1921), Section VI, 11.
35. An account of the development of the idea that Einstein's theory was incomprehensible to scientists as well as to the general public is presented in Jeffrey Crelinsten, 'Einstein, Relativity and the Press: the Myth of Incomprehensibility', *Physics Teacher*, Vol. 18 (1980), 115–22 and 187–93.
36. *New York Times* (10 November 1919), 17.
37. *New York Times* (3 December 1919), 19.
38. *Literary Digest* (March 1920), 73.
39. *New York Times* (4 April 1921), 5.
40. *Washington Post* (3 April 1921), 1.
41. *New York Times* (5 April 1921), 18.
42. *New York Times* (17 April 1921), Section III, 3.
43. M. R. Cohen denied it in *New Republic* (6 July 1921), 172, and Oliver Lodge denied it in *Literary Digest* (9 April 1920), 72.
44. *New York Times* (6 September 1920), 6.
45. Nelson Manfred Blake, *A History of American Life and Thought* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963), 479.
46. Lucy Davidowicz, *On Equal Terms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), Chapter 5.
47. See the editorials in *The Times* (London) (7 November 1919), 13; (15 November 1919), 13; (28 November 1919), 13; and (4 December 1919), 15.
48. *Nation* (27 December 1919), 819.
49. The anti-democratic implications of Einstein's theory are also mentioned and discussed in Carter, op. cit. note 12, 67–71; in Ronald Tobey, *The American Ideology of National Science* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 96–132; and in Crelinsten, op. cit. note 35, 115–22.
50. Tobey, op. cit. note 49, 97 and 111–112. Another account of the debate about relativity in scientific circles and its effect on the public is presented in Stanley Goldberg, *Understanding Relativity: Origin and Impact of a Scientific Revolution* (Boston, Mass.: Birkhäuser, 1984), 241–63 and 307–18. Goldberg's account is primarily concerned with the American response to the special theory of relativity.
51. Preston Slosson, *The Great Crusade and After, 1914–1928* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 424.
52. *Der Tog* (23 April 1921), 3.
53. *Der Tog* (9 April 1921), 11.
54. Phillip Frank, *Einstein, His Life and Times* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 179.
55. See the picture of Einstein, Weizmann, and others on their arrival in New York

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in Ronald Clark, *Einstein, The Life and Times* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1971), between 240 and 241.

56. Melvin Urofsky, *American Zionism from Herzl to the Holocaust* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1975), 283–85.

57. Ibid., 286; Brent Litvinoff, *Weizmann* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1976), 139; and Chaim Weizmann, *Trial and Error: The Autobiography of Chaim Weizmann* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1949), 266.

58. Daniel Kevles, *The Physicists* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 210–11; Banesh Hoffmann and Helen Dukas, *Albert Einstein: Creator and Rebel* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), 145; and Frank, op. cit. note 54, 178–81.

59. Irving Howe, *The World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), 518–51.

60. See the *New York Times* coverage of the Zionist delegation's trip to Boston, (19 May 1921), 32, and to Cleveland, (26 May 1921), 17.

61. *New York Times* (6 April 1921), 1; (7 April 1921), 14; and (9 April 1921), 11; *Forward* (9 April 1921), 1.

62. *New York Times* (9 July 1921), 9.

63. *Forward* (9 July 1921), 4.

64. *Yiddishes Tageblatt* (10 July 1921), 4, and *Jewish Gazette* (15 July 1921), editorial page.

65. Richard Alan Schwartz, 'The FBI and Dr Einstein', in *Nation* (3–10 September 1983), 168.

66. Joseph Kesselring, 'Arsenic and Old Lace', in John Gassner (ed.), *Best Plays of the Modern Theatre*, 2nd series (New York: Crown Publishers, 1947), 459–510.

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